

What is Sin?

The Lord is righteous in all his works which he has commanded us to do. Yet we have not obeyed his voice, to walk in the statutes of the Lord which he set before us. ~ Baruch 2:9-10

AS CREATURES that have been created by a loving God, we are called to love him in return with our whole being. In the Old Testament, God gave the Israelite people the command to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Dt 6:5). This all-embracing effort is centered on doing the will of God in whatever stage or state of life we are in. It is the desire and obligation to be good, to do what is right, and to center our hearts on God; it is our call to holiness.

But as observation of the world and of people reveals to us, God and good and the right are not the pivotal forces that govern many people’s lives. Humanity can be pulled from holiness by the power

of Satan, who through temptation lures the human heart and mind away from God and goodness. Sin is the attraction of the soul to follow our own desires and inclinations which, because of original sin, already tend toward the designs of the evil one.

All sin is an offense against God. Such offenses may occur as thoughts, words, deeds, omissions, or cooperation in the wrongdoing of others. It wounds and sometimes breaks our relationship with God. It also wounds us. We choose to turn our hearts away from genuine love of God and neighbor. This choice of self over God is the exact opposite of Jesus’ obedience to the Father expressed in his words, “not my will, but thine, be done” (Lk 22:42).

The Church distinguishes between sins according to their gravity: “There is sin which is mortal ... All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not mortal” (1 Jn 5:16-17).

Mortal Sin

Mortal sin destroys charity in a person’s heart, breaking his or her relationship with God. All sin offends God, but only mortal sin destroys the love of God in us. Why? A mortal sin involves choosing something that directly contradicts the love of God. For a sin to be mortal, first, what one chooses must constitute *grave matter*; second, one must *know that the action is sinful* and a violation of God’s law; and third, one must *freely choose* to do the evil.

Grave matter is most often directly related to the obligations of the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses. “Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal,

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The Tower of Babel, by Gustave Doré, 1835-1885

“We have the power, through our free will, to bring about our own destruction, but not our own salvation. Yet God won’t save us without our cooperation.”

Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother” (Mk 10:19). In this passage, Jesus invokes these Commandments as a way of calling to mind the entire law of God.

Two other conditions besides gravity of matter are needed to make a sin mortal: full knowledge of our transgression and free, deliberate consent, or personal choice. God is merciful to everyone but, through the light of conscience, he has made his law known. Therefore, *intentional ignorance or hardness of heart is not an excuse for wrongdoing*. Only ignorance that is truly unintentional excuses one from the responsibility of deadly sin. Likewise, if anything or anyone prevents one’s exercise of freedom, then the sin, though a serious offense, is venial.

If any one of these three conditions is missing, then the sin is not mortal. The action is still wrong but, because of ignorance or lack of freedom, one is not fully responsible for it.

Mortal sins result in the loss of the love of God, who is grievously offended. We are deprived of sanctifying grace. We are no longer friends of God, and this excludes ourselves from Christ’s Kingdom. To die in a state of mortal sin is to condemn ourselves to eternal separation from God, surrender of our enjoyment of Heaven, and subject ourselves, soul and body, to the horrible, endless torments of Hell.

Mortal sins are such grievous offenses against our loving God that ordinarily they can be forgiven only through the sacrament of Reconciliation, instituted by Christ in his divine concern for weak and helpless humanity. The enormity of Christ’s redemptive suffering shows us the gravity of mortal sin, as it also reveals the immensity of his caring love.

The Gospel calls attention to two special situations that intensify the gravity of mortal sin. To receive Holy Communion when in the state of mor-



Finding the Lost Sheep in the Wilderness, 19th century lithograph

tal sin is a sacrilege, as St. Paul tells us: *“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord”* (1 Cor 11:27). Forcing Jesus to enter a heart where Satan already holds sway is an unspeakable added sin. Such a condition is truly repugnant to our infinitely pure and holy God. One can only shudder to think of how almighty God must restrain his divine anger when so abused by a mere creature. What ineffable love, what confounding mercy does God offer! In a similar manner, Jesus speaks of his anger at those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit — the deliberate hard-hearted refusal to accept God’s forgiveness offered through the Holy Spirit (see Mt 12:32). This is the ultimate mortal sin, and without full repentance leads inevitably to eternal damnation.

Venial Sin

Less grievous, yet certainly more frequent, are the transgressions against the moral law and will of God called venial sins. Venial sin wounds charity and wounds our relationship with God but is not deadly. A venial sin involves choosing something that is dis-

ordered but not opposed to the love of God. Telling “white” lies, taking things or money of little value from others without asking, and idle talk are examples of venial sins.

Even though these lesser failings are not as grave, they nevertheless are offenses against God. These lesser offenses, if not eradicated, expose us to the acquisition of vices and create in us a habit of sin. A disposition to sin leads us to be complacent about sin, dulling the conscience, engendering inclinations to further sin, and fostering an environment for the commission of mortal sins. We often lose our sense of sin through negligence in curbing our tendencies to self-gratification or forgetfulness to be vigilant and constantly renew ourselves in the love and service of God. Christ reminds us to be vigilant, *“for you know neither the day nor the hour”* (Mt 25:13) when God will demand a reckoning of us: *“This night your soul is required of you”* (Lk 12:20).

Necessity of Cooperation with God’s Grace

Sin is a reality of daily life. God expects us to avoid it; he expects us not to offend him. We have the power, through our free will, to bring about our own destruction, but not our own salvation, for which we

need God’s grace. Yet God won’t save us without our cooperation. We must avoid offenses against God at all costs, even as some Christians have done to the point of martyrdom. If we fail, we must recognize our sinfulness; beg God’s forgiveness and grace, especially in frequent use of the sacrament of Reconciliation; and make a firm purpose of amendment.

To free us from sin and its effects, and to draw our hearts to himself, was the purpose of Christ’s life among us. An angel told Joseph, Jesus’ foster-father, that Mary’s Son must be named Jesus, for he was to save us from our sins (see Mt 1:21). Near the end of his life, Jesus took the cup that he intended for all of us and said, *“this is my blood . . . which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins”* (Mt 26:28).

The cross, the Church, and the confessional are Christ’s legacies to each of us to combat sin and to live for him alone in love.

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight.” (Ps 51:1-4)

(CCC 1846-1869)

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Absolution is given to a penitent by a priest in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit